



# CAREER TALK

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**Interviews conducted  
by “Careers, Cultures,  
& Languages” students**



# MARY JANE MCCULLOUGH

**Mary Jayne McCullough is the Chief Executive Officer at Global Wordsmiths, a company that she started in 2017. She has also been an Adjunct Faculty Lecturer for Carnegie Mellon's Department of Modern Languages Masters in Global Communication and Applied Translation since 2019. She worked as a Spanish translator and interpreter for fifteen years, which allowed her to gain a unique understanding of language access and the language services industry in Pittsburgh.**

**1) I know you are also an Adjunct Faculty Lecturer at Carnegie Mellon. What is your advice for individuals interested in translation technologies? What technical skills and programs are helpful to know as a translator?**

You can sign up for the free version of some sort of CAT tool. MemSource or SmartCat are good ones to get started with. SmartCat especially is very user-friendly, has good tutorials, and an easy-to-follow interface. Another good free one is Wordfast Anywhere, which has fewer restrictions in the free version, but is less user-oriented. These are cloud-based CAT tools that are a good way to mess around and play with a tool that's robust and can help you understand what CAT tools are and how they work before you invest the money in one of the more professional tools. Translators need to use computer-assisted translation tools if you want to be taken seriously as a professional translator. Creating a profile on professional translation websites like ProZ, getting involved with forums and threads, and establishing yourself online are other helpful ways of dipping your toes into the world of translation.

## **2) What are CAT tools?**

CAT tools are text editors that store and leverage translation memories to make translation efficient, accurate, and faster. They also save your translated content and make suggestions based on it next time you translate similar or identical content so you don't have to re-translate what you've already translated. Once you've built up enough translation assets, memories, and term bases and stored them in your CAT tool, it will auto-populate content in the same domain or field as these resources. They will also help you maintain formatting, manage projects, organize files, and do terminology management. They're essentially a sophisticated piece of software that helps organize the features that make future translations better and more consistent. The most popular professional tools are memoQ, Trados, and Wordfast, which have all been around since the 90's.

## **3) How did you get started as an interpreter? Was it something you always wanted to do?**

I came into the profession of interpretation by chance. When I was young, my best friend invited me to spend 6 months in Costa Rica, where I ended up staying for two years. During that time, I discovered that I had an aptitude for language. I learned a lot about the Spanish language while living in Costa Rica and by the time I returned to Pittsburgh, I had decided that I wanted to learn everything that I could about Spanish language and culture. Shortly after, I lived in Mexico City for three years, a highly immersive experience which allowed me to attain near-native proficiency in Spanish. When I began to study at the University of Pittsburgh, I did translation and interpretation on the side. I fell in love with the field and the rest is history. At the time there weren't many other translators or interpreters of the Spanish language so I attribute much of my success to both timing and skill.

Through my interpreting jobs, I became aware of exactly how much of a problem language access was. Many families that I worked with were unable to receive services due to language barriers, and the experience of working with them made me passionate about advocacy in this area. I also gained a passion for written translation—I enjoy solving the puzzle of translation. Translation is interesting because it is simultaneously creative and highly structured. I feel lucky to be able to do something that I both love and am skilled at.

**4) What are the most common language groups in Pittsburgh and the surrounding areas that you provide service for?**

The most common languages that Global Wordsmiths interprets are Arabic, Nepali, Chinese, Russian, Spanish, and Swahili. But if you dig deeper it's even more interesting because individuals speaking the same language don't all have the same story. The Spanish speaking population is from all over the world; Mexico, Honduras, Venezuela, and Columbia, to name a few. The Swahili speaking population are primarily refugees from throughout Africa: Somali Bantu refugees, people from Burundi, the DRC, and many other countries. Many of them spend years living in Kenyan refugee camps and learn Swahili as a second language there. They are often identified as Swahili speakers even though their native language might be another language, but it's easier to provide services for them in Swahili. Because of this, some Swahili speakers may actually have limited Swahili language abilities. This is just one example, there's a wide variety of diversity under every language category.

**5) What are some of the challenges that English language learners typically face in terms of language access? What factors help or hinder their ability to face these challenges?**

There's an exercise that I frequently do during trainings. I ask individuals to think of situations where they think it's important to be able to communicate. Individuals often think of all parts of daily life: going to the bank, communicating with their child's teacher, going to the doctor's office. Then I ask them to think about a time in their lives when they felt like they couldn't communicate or didn't feel understood. One example of such a situation might be going to a foreign country and not speaking the language. Afterwards, I ask individuals to think about how they felt in those situations. Emotions that often come up are frustration and embarrassment.

You have to think about how it might feel to live these moments of frustration every day. It's easy for English language learners to become tired of trying so hard only to be confronted with barriers. So it's the responsibility of established organizations not only to provide appropriate interpretation services and translated material, but to reach out to English language learners and learn about their needs. Once providers reliably provide interpreting services, they need to engage in targeted and deliberate outreach and trust-building with English language learners who are so tired of constantly trying to obtain services. Service providers need to repair the damage that inability to access services has done and put in the work to re-build relationships with those communities. The first step towards this and the most strategic priority to help increase access to services is language access. The term "language access" describes a policy-level and procedural phenomenon, where places have to create deliberate policies to meet the needs of English language learners.

In order to provide language access, an important issue is raising awareness about the importance of using the services of trained interpreters. Service providers and well-meaning advocates and volunteers sometimes don't understand the difference between the skills of family members and professional interpreters, and will depend on family members to provide interpretation. However, family

members may be biased, may not be trained in interpreting, and don't provide patients with the same confidentiality as trained professional interpreters. It's also important to educate service providers about the fact that patients have a legal right to a professional interpreter under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act and Section 1557 of the Affordable Care Act. Basically any recipient of any federal funding is required to provide professional interpreters for clients who need them.

**6) How has the landscape of the language services industry in the greater Pittsburgh area changed in the last 15+ years?**

Though the experience and challenges of English-language learners are very different from those of individuals with disabilities, the discussion of accessibility for both groups has increased in the past years. Before the ADA was published in 1990 there was very little awareness of the idea of accessibility in popular culture. However, since then, discussion of accessibility and a culture of enforcement and advancement of accessibility for individuals with disabilities has increased dramatically.

Language access is also covered under federal law, and I've seen similar increases in the culture of enforcement and advancement recently. 15 years ago, there was no infrastructure, and language access wasn't generally acknowledged as a problem. However, in the past 15 years, the narrative surrounding language accessibility has been advancing all over: cities are getting language access coordinators, there have been pieces of litigation advancing language accessibility, and awareness has generally increased.

Global Wordsmiths has really tried to contribute to this culture of enforcing and advancing laws surrounding language accessibility. In Allegheny County, there's been an increase in organizations interested in advancing language accessibility. The Department of Human Services

established the Immigrants and Internationals Advisory Council eight years ago and there's also the All for All Coalition, the Language Access Committee, the Pittsburgh Language Access Network, and many more. Pittsburgh is magical in that all of these organizations are working together as a coalition to solve the problem of language access. We're not there yet, but language access is on the map and happening. We're in the developmental stage of a total cultural paradigm shift.

*The interview was conducted by Anastasia Wass.*